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Understanding Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)



BRIDGE for Inclusion

A Parent's Guide to Navigating Special Education Services

This guide is intended for parents and caregivers who want to better understand **Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)**, determine whether an IEP may be appropriate for their child, and learn how to navigate the process with confidence.

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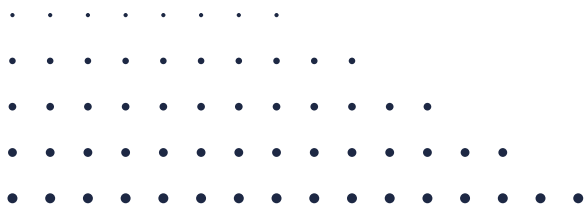


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What is an IEP?

An **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** is a personalized educational plan designed to help eligible students with disabilities receive the support they need to succeed in school. IEPs have three main purposes:

1. Describe your child's educational goals
2. Address your concerns and vision for your child's future
3. Outline what accommodations or specialized services your child will receive

It's important to recognize that every child's IEP will be different. They are individualized to a child's specific goals and needs. It's also important to acknowledge that IEPs are living documents. This means they can be updated as your child's needs change over time.

IEPs can be useful for neurodivergent students and their families because they help reduce barriers and help create more equitable learning opportunities.



BRIDGE TIP

Neurodivergent children of multilingual and underserved backgrounds may face additional barriers such as limited access to translated information, difficulty navigating education systems, or language differences during meetings.

IEPs can't remove all barriers, but they will help ensure that eligible students receive individualized support and services.

What an IEP isn't

- A guarantee of perfect grades
- The same as a 504 Plan
- A one-size-fits-all solution



Who qualifies?

School students between the ages of 3 and 21 with disabilities that impact their ability to learn qualify for an IEP. Note that your school will need to perform an evaluation on your child to determine whether your child has a qualifying disability. However, a qualifying disability does not automatically guarantee an IEP.

Here is a list of disabilities recognized by IDEA:

- Autism
- Deaf-blindness (Both hearing and visual impairments)
- Deafness
- Emotional disturbance
- Hearing impairment
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment
- Specific learning disability
- Speech or language impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment (Including blindness)
- Developmental delay
 - Please note that not all states consider developmental delays as disabilities. Furthermore, not all states define the same age range for a child to have a developmental delay.



BRIDGE TIP

Not speaking English or struggling to speak English is not considered to be a disability. Furthermore, not having enough appropriate learning in math or reading is also not considered a disability.

However, a student can be both an English learner and have a disability. Schools are responsible for determining whether a student's learning challenges are related to a child's English proficiency, disability, or both.

Services an IEP can provide

Depending on your child's disability and educational needs, your child may be eligible to receive one or more of the following types of services:

- **Health and Medical Support:**
 - Audiology
 - Medical services
 - Occupational therapy
 - Physical therapy
 - School health services and school nurse services
- **Behavioral, Emotional, and Mental Health Support**
 - Counseling services
 - Psychological services
 - Social work services in schools
- **Communication and Language Support**
 - Interpreting services
 - Speech-language pathology
- **Mobility and Accessibility Support**
 - Orientation and mobility
 - Transportation
- **Family and Transition Support**
 - Parent counseling and training
 - Rehabilitation counseling
- **Enrichment and Participation**



- Recreation
- **Evaluation and Identification**
 - Early identification of disabilities

Note that not every child may receive every service.

Did you know?

A child does **not** need to be failing school to qualify for an IEP.

How to obtain an IEP

The process of requesting an IEP can often be confusing or frustrating. We recommend following these steps for a more successful and organized outcome:

1. Request an evaluation

To request an evaluation, we recommend beginning by writing a formal letter or email to the school. To find out whom to send your request to, you may ask a teacher, the principal, or call the school district's main office.

While writing your request, be very specific about why you are requesting an evaluation. Specific details may help your school understand your concerns. Consider including other important details such as the date, your child's full name and the name of your child's main teacher, and your address and phone number. Also, it's important to give consent for your child to be evaluated and ask for a "Consent to Evaluate" form to sign. The school won't perform the evaluation until you provide written consent.

Once you are done writing your letter, hand-deliver it, send it as an email, or send it via certified mail. If you hand-deliver the letter, consider asking for a date-stamped signed copy to have for your own records. If you haven't heard back from the school after a reasonable amount of time, contact the school to follow



up. If you do so by phone, make sure to send an email afterwards summarizing the phone conversation.



BRIDGE TIP

Always create copies of important documents for your own records. Also, create a folder for your child's evaluations, report cards, emails, and meeting notes. This helps you stay organized and ensures you don't lose any information.

2. School obtains consent

Once the school receives your request, they review your child's records, academic history, and your stated concerns. Response timelines vary by state. When they do, they will send you a formal packet asking for consent.

It's important to note that right now you are only giving consent to perform an evaluation, not to begin special education services.

3. Evaluation occurs

We recommend you learn about the specific evaluation types that your child may undergo so you are better able to understand the process. All evaluations are performed by qualified professionals with experience working with children. Most evaluations occur at school, although some may be completed at another location if necessary. If a school district doesn't have a specific type of evaluator on staff, your child may have to visit a professional's office. Evaluators will determine your child's skills by looking at test results, student records, screenings, work samples, and talking to teachers, families, and the child.

4. Eligibility meeting

Just because a disability has been identified does not guarantee an IEP. The



purpose of an eligibility meeting is to determine whether or not a child qualifies for special education. Understand that you have a right to see the evaluation results before the meeting occurs.

Once the meeting begins, everyone should introduce themselves. Make sure to introduce yourself too. At the meeting, you will be able to share any concerns or information you have.

Remember that the two main requirements for an IEP are that your child has a disability defined by IDEA and your state, and that the disability is adversely affecting your child's education. Ultimately, the team will decide whether your child is eligible.



BRIDGE TIP

If you feel more comfortable speaking a language other than English, you can request an interpreter before any meeting. Don't wait until the last second; contact the school ahead of time to ensure the proper arrangements can be made.



BRIDGE TIP

Before meetings, consider writing down your questions so you don't forget them. Also, at meetings, feel free to take notes.

5. IEP meeting

Before an IEP meeting, the school will inform you where and when it will occur. At the meeting, you will be able to share what you think should be in your child's



IEP. Remember that you are an important member of the IEP team, so don't be afraid to ask questions if you don't understand something. School teams often use unfamiliar educational terms, and it's okay to ask for clarification.

6. Services begin

Now that the IEP meeting took place, the school will finalize the IEP and begin implementing it.

Note that every year you will need to attend another IEP meeting to review your child's progress and make any necessary changes to the IEP.



Parent rights

As a parent, you have important legal rights in the IEP process. Understanding these rights can help you advocate for your child. Note the following rights:

- Right to give or deny consent
- Right to disagree with a school's decision
- Right to an independent evaluation
- Right to participate in IEP meetings
- Right to receive prior written notice
- Right to review your child's educational records
- In some cases, the right to private education paid by the public school



BRIDGE TIP

Always remember:

- You are part of the IEP team.
- You can ask questions.
- You can request meetings.
- You can request interpreters.
- You can receive information in a language you understand.

FAQs

"Is an IEP the same as a 504 Plan?"

No. While both IEPs and 504 Plans aim to reduce barriers for students with disabilities, they are not the same. 504 plans are available to a broader range of people, provide accommodations but not specialized instruction, and are applied by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, among other differences. Learn more about 504 plans in our 504 plan guide.

"Can my child have an IEP without a medical diagnosis?"

Yes. Medical diagnoses aren't required for a child to qualify for an IEP. Schools will perform evaluations to determine eligibility, although outside medical information may provide useful context.

"How often is an IEP updated?"

An IEP must be updated every year to support and reflect your child's changing needs.

"Can I bring someone to an IEP meeting?"

Yes. You may bring anyone who has knowledge or special expertise regarding your child. This may include a family friend, a private therapist, or even a lawyer.

"Can I request an evaluation even if my child's teacher disagrees?"

Yes. You will always have the right to request an evaluation, although the school's response may differ depending on state law and the available information.



"What if English isn't my first language?"

Everyone has the right to request an evaluation and be part of their child's IEP process, regardless of their preferred language. Schools should communicate with families in a language they can understand. This includes providing an interpreter at meetings and translated documents when appropriate.



BRIDGE TIPS

Always remember:

- You are part of the IEP team.
- You can ask questions.
- You can request meetings.
- You can request interpreters.
- You can receive information in a language you understand.

Sources

California State Council on Developmental Disabilities

The Difference Between IEPs and 504 Plans

<https://scdd.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/33/2018/03/The-Difference-Between-IEP-and-504-Plans.pdf>

Exceptional Lives

What is an IEP and what purpose does it serve?

<https://exceptionallives.org/guides/what-is-iep-what-purpose-does-it-serve/>

Find Parent Advocates

You Have the Right to Bring an Advocate to Your IEP Meeting

<https://findparentadvocates.com/blog/right-to-bring-advocate-iep-meeting>



National Education Association

Differences between a 504 Plan and an Individualized Education Program (IEP)

<https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/differences-between-504-plan-and-individualized-education-program-iep>

Parent Center Hub

Categories of Disability Under IDEA

https://www.parentcenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/repo_items/gr3.pdf

Parent Center Hub

Requesting an Initial Evaluation for Special Education Services

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/evaluation-2/>

Parent Center Hub

Specifying Related Services in the IEP

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep-relatedservices/#>

The Arc

What Is an IEP? Rights, Services, and Supports Explained

<https://thearc.org/blog/iep-rights-explained-what-every-parent-and-educator-should-know/>

Understood

Requesting an evaluation

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/requesting-an-evaluation>

Understood

The evaluation process: What to expect

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/the-evaluation-process-what-to-expect>

Understood

The IEP meeting: An overview

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/the-iep-meeting-an-overview>

Understood

What are your rights in the IEP process?

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-are-your-rights-in-the-iep-process>

Understood

What is an IEP?

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-is-an-iep>



Understood

What to expect at an IEP eligibility determination meeting

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-to-expect-at-an-iep-eligibility-meeting>

Understood

6 steps to request a free school evaluation

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/6-steps-for-requesting-a-school-evaluation>

Undivided

List of Accommodations for IEPs and 504s

<https://undivided.io/resources/list-of-accommodations-for-ieps-and-504s-210>

US Department of Education

Sec. 300.34 Related Services

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.34>

DISCLAIMER

This resource is intended for educational purposes only and should not be considered legal or medical advice. Policies and procedures may vary by state.

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Continue Learning

Thank you for supporting BRIDGE's mission to make educational resources more accessible for every family.

Explore more free resources at
bridgeforinclusion.org

Upcoming guides:

- What is a 504 Plan?
- Preparing for school meetings
- Requesting a school evaluation
- Evaluation request letter template

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